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## THE LUCRETIAN INVOCATION OF VENUS

BY GEORGE DEPUE HADZSITS

The paradox of the passionate Lucretian invocation of Venus, that constitutes a prelude to a great philosophical system which makes a mockery of old myths and robs old forms and ritual of their mystery, can be interpreted only in terms of the Epicurean theology. The key to the correct interpretation of this famous invocation of Venus must be sought in the fact of prayer among the Epicureans and in a knowledge of the nature of that prayer.<sup>1</sup> Epicurean prayer so easily and so frequently misinterpreted, both in ancient and in modern times, can be properly understood only from the Epicurean point of view. It is from this point of view that the following explanation is attempted.

In spite of the vital differences between the Epicurean theology and the pagan religion, such as a denial by the former of a divine creation of the world, and of Providence, and a removal of the gods beyond the reach of emotional enthusiasm, nevertheless prayer (a seemingly illogical procedure), transformed into an informed worship among the Epicureans, was not incompatible with the spirit of Epicurean philosophy. Says Velleius the Epicurean:

*Si nihil aliud quaereremus nisi ut deos pie coleremus et ut superstitione liberaremur, satis erat dictum; nam et praestans deorum natura hominum pietate coleretur, cum et aeterna esset et beatissima (habet enim venerationem iustam, quicquid excellit), et metus omnis a vi atque ira deorum pulsus esset; intellegitur enim a beata immortalique natura et iram et gratiam segregari.*

And again:

*His terroribus ab Epicuro soluti et in libertatem vindicati nec metui-  
mus eos, quos intellegimus nec sibi fingere ullam molestiam nec alteri*

<sup>1</sup>Lucretian scholars have confined themselves to two aspects of this problem, viz.: (1) a study of the contributory motives that influenced Lucretius in the choice of "Venus" for this invocation, and (2) an interpretation of the significance of "Venus" to Lucretius, as a Roman and as an Epicurean; but the important preliminary step—of inquiry into prayer and its significance among the Epicureans—has been neglected.

quaerere, et pie sancteque colimus naturam [deorum] excellentem atque praestantem.<sup>1</sup>

In place of the *quid pro quo* prayer of the pagan world which sought the material rewards that might accrue, the Epicurean school encouraged prayer representing a disinterested, high-minded admiration and adoration of an ideal. Prayer (in its genesis and in its employment, doubtless representing, at once, for some an individual, emotional need, and for others a social habit) became through the Epicurean rationalization of religion, theoretically at least, an intellectual matter, conducted, according to the Epicurean conception, truly *pie* and *sancte*. The higher aspiration of the Epicureans for an ideal that might be worshiped because of its perfection, found expression in prayer, that necessarily involved the religion of poetry, of mythology, of cultus, and of dogma, while at the same time, it gave to gods and goddesses a new function and character. It is inconceivable that prayer among the Epicureans was wholly or even in large part the result of a concessionary or cowardly spirit; it was rather a psychological necessity and at the same time, as conceived by Epicureans, not inconsistent with the entire Epicurean philosophy of religion. Sincerity in the matter of prayer would necessarily among the Epicureans be a variable matter, as also the degree of attachment to the old religion of which the Epicurean theology was an outgrowth, a purification, and a reconstruction. Plutarch failed to understand Epicurus of whom he said, with irony, *καὶ γὰρ τὴν πρόνοιαν ἀναιρῶν, εὐσέβειαν ἀπολιπεῖν λέγει*.<sup>2</sup> Philodemus' statement<sup>3</sup> also makes it clear that "the Epicureans were willing to

<sup>1</sup>Cic. *De nat. deor.* i. 17. 45; i. 20. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Plut. *Adv. Col.* viii. 7; cf. also R. Heinze's *Lucretius* iii (Leipzig, 1897), p. 47: τὸν ὕμνον τῷ θεῷ ἀπονέμειν δεῖ, τὸν δὲ ἔπαινον τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ἀνδράσι hatte Epikur selbst gelehrt (Gnomol. Paris, ed. Boissonade anecd. i, p. 122. 6).

<sup>3</sup>Philodemus *De mus.* iv. (Vol. Herc. I.), col. 4.

ὅτι τὸ δαιμόνιον μὲν  
οὐ προσδεῖται τίνος τιμῆς, ἡ-  
μῖν δὲ φυσικὸν ἐστὶν αὐτὸ  
τιμᾶν, μάλιστα με[ν] ὁσίαις  
ὑπολήψεσιν, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ  
τοῖς κατὰ τὸ πάτριον παραδε-  
δομένοις ἐκ[κ]άστῳ τῶν  
κατὰ μ[ε]ρος . . .

join in the customary services of religion"<sup>1</sup>—a conduct both natural, and (not despite Epicurean philosophy but because of it) reasonable. The very common hostile feeling that the "Epicureans, although disbelieving in a divine power that governs the world, yet endeavored to keep up an appearance of divine reverence,"<sup>2</sup> while taking into account the necessary character of a national or social religion, is wrong in its interpretation of Epicurean motives.

It is in the foregoing passages and in the light of their evidence, which alone enables us to put the right construction upon it, that we read the true significance of prayer among the Epicureans. It was prayer to which a purified and exalted meaning was given, which, sprung from an intellectual calm, had, however, probably little social adaptability,<sup>3</sup> and was thus related to the essential nature of Epicurean ethics of individualism.

The primarily intellectual character of Epicurean prayer did not, however, exclude an emotional appreciation of the old religious system. A pure, intellectual ideal was quite unattainable, and a complete emotional detachment from the organized religion of the Roman society of the first century B.C. was quite impossible. Prayer among the Epicureans becomes all the more intelligible to us, as it was doubtless originally facilitated, by reason of the numerous points of contact between the Epicurean theology and the older Greek and Roman religion. The Epicureans, while seeking escape from the entanglements of superstition and fear<sup>4</sup> that weighed down the older traditions, yet availed themselves, in prayer, of the ancient terminology;<sup>5</sup> and thus their devotions were allied, in externals, with established customs and institutions. Although the Epicureans denied Providence, although their gods were far removed from man's world, nevertheless the

<sup>1</sup> Zeller *Stoics and Epicureans and Skeptics*, p. 470, tr. Reichel.

<sup>2</sup> Cic. *De nat. deor.* i. 2. 3; cf. Stickney's edition (Boston, 1903), p. 171 (n. 33. 16).

<sup>3</sup> Lucr. i. 80. 945.

<sup>4</sup> Lucr. i. 65, 101, 146, 932; ii. 657, 1091; iii. 37 ff., 978; iv. 7; v. 43, 1207; vi. 50, 379 (v. 80). Cic. *De nat. deor.* i. 16. 42; i. 17. 45; i. 20. 54-56; *De div.* ii. 72; *Tusc. disp.* i. 21. 48. Plut. *Adv. Col.* xxx. i. *Non posse suav. vivi sec. Epic.*, c. 8. Diog. L. x. 113, 123, 142.

<sup>5</sup> Lucr. ii. 652 ff.; Cic. *De nat. deor.* i. 15. 40; ii. 28. 71; Plut. *Adv. Col.* xxii. 3.

indebtedness of the new theology to the old was so great that in many respects the Epicurean gods might have been recognized by any pagan worshiper as gods of the ancient worship, since the Epicurean gods were after all but the ancient gods of legend, purified, refined, and subtilized;<sup>1</sup> the national habit and form of prayer remained a possibility for the Epicurean school. "No positive religion that has moved men has been able to start with a *tabula rasa*. . . . In form, if not in substance, the new system must be in contact . . . with the older ideas and practices which it finds in possession."<sup>2</sup> The Epicureans, indeed, prided themselves, as Zeller says, "in contrast to the Stoics, on their agreement by means of their theology, with the anthropomorphic views of the popular belief."<sup>3</sup> The Epicureans' theology was a polytheistic theology and their polytheism anthropomorphic. The evolution of Epicurean religion out of the older premises had not proceeded to the point of elimination of prayer, albeit there was a reconstruction of the conception of the object and nature of prayer.

The Lucretian invocation of Venus, as a typical Epicurean prayer, must be interpreted in the light of Epicurean theory and practice—a prayer, then, with a deep, complex, religious significance to the sincere Epicurean himself, a prayer that included an emotional attachment to older traditions, to established customs and beliefs, and also an enlightened intellectual, Epicurean interpretation of such religious material.<sup>4</sup> "Lucretius felt with the intensity of genius all the misery which perverted conceptions of the divine nature had inflicted on human life."<sup>5</sup> The remarkable lines:

nec pietas ullast velatum saepe videri  
vertier ad lapidem atque omnis accedere ad aras

<sup>1</sup>Schoemann *De Epic. theol.*, *Opuscula* IV, p. 336 (1871); Philodemus *Περὶ εὐσεβείας* (ed. Gomperz, 1865).

<sup>2</sup>W. Robertson Smith *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, Lect. i, p. 2 (1894).

<sup>3</sup>Zeller, p. 470; cf. Cic. *De nat. deor.* i. 18. 46; ii. 17. 45. The Epicurean theology was also closer to the old religion than that of Antisthenes; cf. Cic. *De nat. deor.* i. 13. 32; Philodem. (Hercl. Fr. 21, 72 Gomp.).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Pater *Marius the Epicurean*; Tennyson's "Lucretius."

<sup>5</sup>S. Dill *Roman Society*, p. 445.

nec procumbere humi prostratum et pandere palmas  
ante deum delubra nec aras sanguine multo  
spargere quadrupedum nec votis nectere vota,  
sed mage pacata posse omnia mente tueri,<sup>1</sup>

also reveal the truth of the Epicurean attitude—the Epicurean ideal of religious worship, a piety essentially intellectual in character, the Epicurean hope of salvation through wisdom.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Lucretius, an emotional attachment through poetry, art, and ritual<sup>3</sup> existed, that bound him to the old religion by subtle associations and obscure longings, the force of which no one can measure exactly, while at the same time to the old forms new meanings were given, and a prayer that elsewhere might be the noblest hymn of the orthodox faith must be regarded as the sublimest expression we have of Epicurean worship.

Unique in its character, this invocation is not conceived in the same spirit as the hymn of Cleanthes to Zeus,<sup>4</sup> back of which there is a totally different philosophy and religion of Stoicism; it is not parallel to the Sapphic verses to Aphrodite, nor akin in spirit to the Venus invocation we find in the *Fasti* of Ovid,<sup>5</sup> whose religion lay so light on his conscience. It is wrong to suppose that the Lucretian invocation is a mere red rag to attract attention. There is no proof whatever that it represents a return to the old religion. It is quite impossible (despite the psychological rivalry between reason and feeling that is responsible for many contradictions in the *De rerum natura*) to lift to the dignity of an argument the hypothesis that in the impetuous and impulsive nature of the Venus invocation, representing a high tide of passion, we are to read a reaction in favor of the old order on the part of Lucretius, who surrenders an intellectual system for an inherited national religion of the Roman race. Nor is it merely a concession to popular prejudice. Religious freedom in

<sup>1</sup>Lucr. v. 1198-1203.

<sup>2</sup>The Lucretian lines do not imply an abolition of ceremonial practices, and vs. 1203 may, perhaps, even mean "to guard, or cherish all with serene intelligence."

<sup>3</sup>The influence of formal ceremonial on Lucretius is sufficiently evidenced by the majestic description of the Cybele cult (ii. 581-660); see Sellar *The Roman Poets of the Republic*, p. 368, and the reference to the *Life of Diderot*.

<sup>4</sup>Cleanthes' Hymn (Stob. *Ecl.* i, p. 30).

<sup>5</sup>Ovid *Fasti* iv. 90 ff.; cf. "expedit esse deos, et ut expedit, esse putemus."

Rome, in the first century B.C., relieved heretical opinions of danger, and besides, Lucretius was incapable of hypocritical parade. It is equally false to consider it simply a conventional literary ornament.<sup>1</sup> It is utterly unthinkable that in the Venus invocation Lucretius has been untrue to himself, and that a literary monument to fearless honesty should have as its preamble a prayer as meaningless as the mumbling of priests.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the Venus invocation of Lucretius, striking a note of the deepest and most sincere religious experience, is the frank and outspoken *supplicatio* of an Epicurean, wholly in accord with the spirit of Epicurean philosophy and religion, and from the Epicurean point of view, truly *pia* and *sancta*.

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<sup>1</sup>It would, if purely conventional and imitative, rather be a literary blemish (Hor. *Ars poet.* init.); neither Varr. *De re rust.* (init.), nor Ovid *Met.* (init.), nor Catull. lxvi. 15, etc., nor Aratus' *Phaenom.* (proem.), nor Emped. (address to Calliope), nor Verg. *Aen.* i. 8, nor Hor. *Carm.* i. 35, i. 19. 1, etc., is more than a literary parallel.

<sup>2</sup>Lucretius was rather of "intrepid audacity and noble sincerity" (Tyrrell "Lucretius," *Atlantic Monthly* LXXIV 1894, p. 56), and one who was "too truth-loving to condescend to rhetoric" (Symonds "Lucretius," *Fortnightly Rev.* XXIII 1875, p. 44).